

Nita M. Lowey

1937–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

1989–



Image courtesy of the Member

A FORMER NEW YORK STATE OFFICIAL WHO GOT HER START in politics working for Mario Cuomo, Nita Lowey won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1988, defeating the scion of a local political dynasty and a two-term incumbent. Representing sections of Westchester and Rockland counties, Representative Lowey holds an influential post on the Appropriations Committee and has been a passionate congressional advocate of women's issues.

Nita Sue Melnikoff was born in New York, New York, on July 5, 1937. She attended the New York public schools, graduating from the Bronx High School of Science in 1955. She earned a bachelor of science degree four years later from Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Nita Melnikoff married attorney Stephen Lowey in 1961 and soon after left her advertising agency job to raise three children: Dana, Jacqueline, and Douglas. The family settled in Queens, New York, and Lowey became involved in community projects. In 1974, she joined the campaign of Mario Cuomo for lieutenant governor of New York. Cuomo lost, but was appointed secretary of state afterward. Impressed by Lowey's work, he hired her for a position in his department's antipoverty division. From 1975 to 1985 Lowey served as an assistant to the secretary of state for economic development and neighborhood preservation and as deputy director of the division of economic opportunity. Lowey then served two years as assistant secretary of state, from 1985 to 1987.

Lowey's first run for political office came in 1988 when she mounted an impressive campaign for the U.S. House seat, which represented much of affluent Westchester County outside of New York City. In the Democratic primary, Lowey defeated Hamilton Fish III, son of a sitting House Member and part of a long New York political dynasty. In the general election, she defeated a two-term Republican incumbent, Joseph DioGuardi, by three percent of the vote. Even after redistricting in the early 1990s changed her district's boundaries to encompass parts of Queens and the Bronx, Lowey defeated her opponents by large margins. In 2004, she won re-election to her ninth consecutive term by besting her Republican opponent with 70 percent of the vote.¹

When Congresswoman Lowey was sworn into the 101st Congress (1989–1991) in January 1989, she received assignments on three committees: Education and Labor, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. In the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she left all three of those panels to accept a seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee, where she rose to Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Lowey also won a post on the newly created Select Homeland Security Committee. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Lowey became the first woman and the first New Yorker to head the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, where she set fundraising records.²

In Congress, Lowey has been a prominent proponent of women's health issues. She has been a vocal advocate for pro-choice initiatives and for continued funding for international family planning programs. In 1998, she successfully shepherded an amendment through the House that required federal health insurance plans to provide contraceptive coverage. A former co-chair of the Congressional Women's Caucus and the House Pro-Choice Caucus, Lowey also helped establish the Congressional Advisory Panel to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy to encourage sexual abstinence and responsibility among teens. Lowey has procured federal funding for domestic violence prevention programs, battered women's shelters, and screening programs for breast cancer and cervical cancer.³

From her position as the top Democrat on the Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Lowey has been one of the most determined congressional advocates for strong U.S. ties to Israel. She is the chief advocate for the annual U.S. aid package to the Jewish state; for instance, allocating \$3 billion in military aid and economic assistance as part of the larger 1994 foreign aid bill.⁴ More recently, Lowey has used her post to win increased funding for nation-building efforts in Afghanistan and for international programs for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

Lowey's post on the Appropriations Committee has helped her look out for the interests of her district and New York state. After the 2001 terrorist attacks, Lowey was instrumental in securing \$20 billion in federal funding for reconstruction and relief in New York City. She also has obtained federal funds to help local officials prepare for bioterrorist incidents and to provide local emergency workers with the latest communication and rescue equipment.⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Nita M. Lowey," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.
- 2 Miles A. Pomper, "Rep. Nita M. Lowey," 28 December 2002, *CQ Weekly*: 51.
- 3 "Official Biography of Nita Lowey," <http://www.house.gov/lowey/aboutNita.htm> (accessed 14 August 2002).
- 4 *Current Biography*, 1997 (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1997): 341; "Official Biography of Nita Lowey."
- 5 *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 716–717.